

# The Changing Face of Seniors: Ethnic Diversity in the Aging Baby Boom Population

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*Symposium on Diversity*

# The Changing Face of Seniors: Ethnic Diversity in the Aging Baby Boom Population

*Asian/Pacific elders present unique issues in professional services, including language barriers, family loyalties and a diversity of cultural backgrounds. This article sketches a profile of this growing population. This article is based on the author's presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Elder Law Section of the Association of American Law Schools in January, 2001 in San Francisco.*

**By Clayton Fong**

**W**e hear a lot of discussion around the aging of our baby boomers and its tremendous impact on our public policy decisions, our economy, our government, and other institutions. What is seldom discussed is how the face of seniors will be more racially and ethnically diverse as the baby boom population ages, and the challenges that poses to organizations serving those seniors.

In the Asian community, the baby boom change is going to create a twenty percent increase in the number of those over age sixty-five in the next several decades. During that same time there will likely be a 200% increase in Asian/Pacific elders, as well as Hispanic elders. In cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York those numbers are likely to be even more dramatic. The irony is that in the halls of Congress in Washington DC, those groups are often not even on the radarscope.

Beyond the growth and the numbers lie the challenges. The Asian/Pacific community, including those

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over age sixty-five, is seventy percent foreign born. Of those over age sixty-five, fifty-eight percent speak a language other than English as their primary language. Fully one-third of the Asian/Pacific community has no one in their household who speaks English. These are pretty poignant issues with regard to providing access to these communities. How do they get access on a day-to-day basis?

When most people think about the Asian/Pacific community, they think of the Westinghouse Science winners and the top graduating class of the top Ivy League schools. Among Asian/Pacifics and Asian/Pacific elders there exists a high percentage of those with a college education. However, what is not very well known is that this group also has a high percentage of citizens who are illiterate with less than a ninth grade education. It is a very bimodal community—there is success and at the same time tremendous challenge.

Our infrastructure is not ready to deal with this new baby boom aging population. As an example, the typical American family no longer sits down to a meal consisting of meat and potatoes as they did years ago. Today, Americans eat from various ethnic food groups on a daily basis. Unfortunately, senior programs and/or services such as the senior meal program do not reflect this change. We now live and work in a society that is increasingly becoming more diverse. Over the years, our concept or idea of diversity has evolved to take on a different meaning. Along with this different meaning are different challenges. In order for us to address these challenges, we need to embrace the new idea and search for creative solutions. The schools were forced to work with the issues surrounding diversity and have made great strides in the process. The aging network is a little behind the curve, and we can use our jobs and positions to assist them to work with and within a diverse community.

Fortunately, people's attitudes have changed in the last four to six years. In 1996 we were fighting what in essence was a welfare reform bill that took one million legal immigrant seniors and literally threw them out the window. A million seniors, about one-third Asian/Pacific, one-third Latino, and one-third everybody else, received notices that they might lose their Supplemental Security Income, get thrown out of their nursing homes, and/or lose other government benefits. Seniors were fighting for their very survival. The good news is that no one is

talking about that now. President Bush campaigned on pro-immigrant positions, and we are going to work to try to hold the administration's feet to the fire on those issues.

Contrary to the myths, people do not immigrate here as elders who need services. Most of those who immigrated after 1996 are working, but there will be an issue whether the safety net will be available for them, and we are going to have to deal with it sooner or later. The broad issue of access is one for any emerging community. It is a national advocacy issue, but also, more importantly, a local advocacy issue because most of the services, other than Social Security and Medicare, are locally based. Advocacy is needed both at the national level for broader policy issues and also at the local level for senior centers, long-term care facilities, and assisted-living facilities to make that infrastructure more available.

Without a doubt, Social Security, Medicare, and the Patient Bill of Rights are going to be among the top five policy issues. Our primary goal will be to guard against what happened in welfare reform that ended up being carried on the backs of legal immigrants. We have to diligently watch and understand the current issues and policies and the actions of policy makers. Secondly, we want to be proactive.

When programs such as Social Security and Medicare were first designed there were forty or fifty workers per retiree. More recently in the fifties there were sixteen workers per retiree, and now there are about four workers per retiree. When the baby boomers hit, there will be about two workers per retiree. This demographic is creating the squeeze. Ironically on the issue of immigration, ours is the one country in the world where people from all walks of life, in every corner of the world, want to come and work. But we have this sort of schizophrenic policy—we want people to come here and contribute, but on the other hand, we want to close the borders. The reality is that we can change the workforce demographic through more liberal immigration policies that encourage people to come and contribute, which is what this country was built on.

Not that long ago every politician proudly proclaimed his or her immigrant roots and talked about how "I was born in a log cabin" or "my parents or grandparents came here with nothing but the clothes on their backs and they started over." For some reason in the last few years there has been a shift the other way. We have run away from the proud

heritage that this country was founded on. The Statue of Liberty says, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses . . ." It does not have a disclaimer that says, "unless you're poor, disabled, or somehow in need."

Hopefully, we have been through the darkest period. At least I'm optimistic despite the evidence of the ugly specter of xenophobia still existing in this country, which is a by-product of having a country that is more open than any place else in the world. We must resist the temptation to scapegoat newcomers to this land. Newcomers are not part of the problem; they are part of the solution. They are also a reality. Census numbers show that since 1970 the number of immigrants in this country has risen from under five percent to over ten percent. In places such as California, New York, and Florida, the number is over twenty percent. The largest number of immi-

grants in the United States was during the Industrial Revolution. It was that influx of immigrants that helped usher in a new prosperity.

Lastly, on the immigrant front, economist Alan Greenspan says the biggest single threat to our continued growth is not having enough people in the workforce to be productive in this society. Many other countries in Europe and Japan are already experiencing a decline in the growth of their workforce. In this country a large number of women entered the workforce through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, which helped keep our economic engine growing. But the number of women in the workforce has probably reached its peak. So who is the next group that will fill the gap in our declining workforce? Hopefully, this country will realize the contributions immigrants have made and will continue to make under an enlightened immigration policy.

## Appendix

### English-speaking Ability for Person 65+

|            | Number 65+ | Speak a Language<br>Other than English | Speak Only a Language<br>Other than English |
|------------|------------|--|---|
| Total U.S. | 31,241,831 | 12%                                    | 3%  |
| API        | 454,458    | 80%                                    | 30%   |
| Hispanic   | 1,056,196  | 86%                                    | 34%   |
| Am. Indian | 117,723    | 31%                                    | 8%  |
| Black      | 2,500,841  | 4%                                     | 1%  |

### Foreign born Population 65+

|                          |     |
|--------------------------|-----|
| For U.S. overall         | 9%  |
| For Pacific Asian elders | 70% |

Almost all (90%) of these subgroups are foreign born:

|            |             |            |
|------------|-------------|------------|
| Laotians   | Indonesians | Pakistanis |
| Cambodians | Thai        | Filipinos  |
| Vietnamese | Hmong       | Koreans    |

Among Chinese and Asian Indians, the proportion of foreign born members is about 83% each, compared to 17% for Japanese in the U.S.